Gilbertese language

Gilbertese or **taetae ni Kiribati**, also **Kiribati** (sometimes *Kiribatese*), is a Oceanic language, Micronesian language group, of the Austronesian language family. It has a basic verb–object–subject word order.

Contents

Gilbertese	
Kiribati	
Taetae ni Kiribati	
Native to	Kiribati
Native speakers	(120,000 cited 1988–2010)[1]
Language family	Austronesian
	■ Malayo-Polynesian
	■ Oceanic
	■ Micronesian
	■ Micronesian Proper
	■ **Gilbertese**
Writing system	Latin script (Written Gilbertese)
Official status	
Official language in	Kiribati
Regulated by	Kiribati Language Board
Language codes	
ISO 639-2	gil (https://www.loc.gov/standards/iso639-2/php/langcodes_name.php?code_ID=162)
ISO 639-3	gil
Glottolog	gilb1244 (http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/gilb1244)[2]

Name

The word *Kiribati*, the current name of the islands, is the local adaptation of the previous European name "Gilberts". Early European visitors, including Commodore John Byron, whose ships happened on Nikunau in 1765, had named some of the islands the Kingsmill or Kings Mill Islands[3] but in 1820 they were renamed, in French, *les îles Gilbert* by Admiral Adam Johann von Krusenstern, after Captain Thomas Gilbert, who, along with Captain John Marshall, had passed through some of these islands in 1788. Frequenting of the islands by Europeans and Chinese dates from whaling and oil trading from the 1820s, when no doubt Europeans learnt to speak it, as I-Kiribati learnt to speak English and other languages foreign to them. However, it wasn't until Hiram Bingham II took up missionary work on Abaiang in the 1860s that the language began to take on the written form known nowadays. For example, Bingham was the first to translate the Bible into Gilbertese, and wrote several hymn books, short dictionaries and commentaries in the language of the Gilbert Islands.

The official name of the language is *te taetae ni Kiribati*, or 'the Kiribati language', but the common name is *te taetae n aomata*, or 'the language of the people'.

The first complete and comprehensive description of this language was published in *Dictionnaire gilbertin–français* of Father Ernest Sabatier (981 pp, 1952-1954), a Catholic priest. This complete dictionary was later translated into English by Sister Olivia (with the help of South Pacific Commission).

Speakers

Over 96% of the 110,000 people living in Kiribati declare themselves I-Kiribati[4] and speak Gilbertese. Gilbertese is also spoken by most inhabitants of Nui (Tuvalu), Rabi Island (Fiji), Mili (Marshall Islands) and some other islands where I-Kiribati have been relocated (Solomon Islands, notably Choiseul Province; and Vanuatu)[5] or emigrated (to New Zealand and Hawaii mainly).

Unlike some other languages in the Pacific region, the Gilbertese language is far from extinct, and most speakers use it daily. 97% of those living in Kiribati are able to read in Gilbertese, and 80% are able to read English.[4]

Countries by number of Gilbertese speakers

1. Kiribati, 110,000 (2015 census)[1]
2. Fiji, 5,300 cited 1988[1]
3. Solomon Islands, 4,870 cited 1999[1]
4. Tuvalu, 870 cited 1987[1]

Linguistics and study

The Gilbertese language has two main dialects: the Northern and the Southern dialects. The main differences between them are in the pronunciation of some words. The islands of Butaritari and Makin also have their own dialect. It differs from the standard Kiribati in some vocabulary and pronunciation.

Dialect listing

- Banaban (Banaba Island and Fiji)
- Northern Kiribati (Makin, Butaritari, Marakei, Abaiang, Tarawa, Maiana, Kuria, Abemama and Aranuka)

  - Butaritari/Makin (Butaritari and Makin)
- Nuian (Tuvalu)
- Rabi (Fiji)
- Southern Kiribati (Tabiteuea, Onotoa, Nonouti, Beru Island, Nikunau, Tamana and Arorae)

Historical sound changes

Gilbertese reflexes of Proto-Oceanic consonants[6] (in IPA)

Proto-Oceanic	*mp	*mp,ŋp	*p	*m	*m,ŋm	*k	*ŋk	*ŋ	*j	*w	*t		*s,nj	*ns,j	*j	*nt,nd	*d,R	*l	*n	*ɲ
Proto-Micronesian	*p	*pʷ	*f	*m	*mʷ	*k	*x	*ŋ	*j	*w	*t	*T	*s	*S	*Z	*c	*r	*l	*n	*ɲ
Gilbertese	*p	*pɣ	*∅	*m	*mɣ	*k, ∅¹	*∅	*ŋ	*∅	*βɣ	*t, ∅²	*t	*t,s²	*r	*r	*r	*∅	*n	*n	*n

¹ Sometimes when reflecting Proto-Micronesian /t/.
² Sometimes when reflecting Proto-Micronesian /k/.

Phonology

Gilbertese contrasts 13 consonants and 10 vowels sounds[7]

Consonants

	Bilabial		Apical	Velar
	plain	velarized		
Nasal	m mː	mɣ	n nː	ŋ ŋː
Stop	p	pɣ	t¹	k
Fricative		βɣ²		
Flap			ɾ³	

1. /t/ is lenited and assibilated to [s] before /i/
2. The labiovelar fricative /βɣ/ may be a flap or an approximant, depending on the context.[8]
3. /ɾ/ does not occur in the syllable coda[9]

	Vowels	
	Front	**Back**
Close¹	i iː	u uː
Mid	e eː	o oː
Open		a aː

1. Short /i/ and /u/ may become semivowels when followed by more sonorous vowels. /ie/ → [je] ('sail').[10] Kiribati has syllabic nasals, although syllabic /n/ and /ŋ/ can be followed only by consonants that are homorganic.[8]

The /a/ pronounciation is closer to /ä/ except after velarized BW and MW.

Quantity is distinctive for vowels and nasal consonants but not for the remaining sounds so that *ana* /ana/ (third person singular article) contrasts with *aana* /aːna/ ('its underside') as well as *anna* /anːa/ ('dry land'). Other minimal pairs include:[8]

Short	Translation	Long	translation
te ben /tepen/	ripe coconut	*te been* /tepeːn/	pen
ti /ti/	we	*tii* /tiː/	only
on /on/	full	*oon* /oːn/	turtles
te atu /atu/	bundle	*te atuu* /atuː/	head
tuanga /twaŋa/	to tell	*tuangnga* /twaŋːa/	to tell him/her

Grammar

Nouns

Any noun can be formed from a verb or an adjective by preceding it with the definite article "te".

- *nako* (to go)
- *te nako* (the going)
- *uraura* (red)
- *te uraura* (the redness)

Nouns can be marked for possession (by person and number). Plurality is only marked in some nouns by lengthening the first vowel.

- *te boki* (book)
- *booki* (books)

There is no marked gender. Biological gender can be marked by adding *mmwaane* (male) or *aiine* (female) to the noun.

- *te moa* (chicken)
- *te moa mmwaane* (rooster) (writing *mwane* is more usual)
- *te moa aiine* (hen) (writing *aine* is more usual)

For human nouns, the linker 'n' may be used.

- *ataei* (child)
- *ataeinimmwaane* (boy)
- *ataeinnaiine* (girl)

Agentive nouns can be created with the particle *tia* (singular) or *taan(i)* (plural).[11]

Articles

	Singular	Plural
Articles	te	taian

The article 'te' is neither definite or indefinite, it just marks that the next word is a noun and that it's singular, although it can be translated as "the" most times. The plural article is optional since there are many other ways to express plurality, namely in demonstratives, numerals, etc.

Personal articles

	Masculine	Feminine
Personal article	te (tem, ten, teng)	nei

The personal articles are used before personal names. The masculine form is 'te' before names beginning with <i, u, w, b', ng>, 'tem' before <b, m>, 'ten' before <a, e, o, n, r, t> and 'teng' before <k, (ng)>.

Pronouns

Pronouns have different forms according to case: nominative (subject), accusative (object), emphatic (vocatives, adjunct pronouns), genitive (possessives).

	Nominative	Accusative	Emphatic	Genitive	Possessive suffixes
1S	i, n	-ai	ngai	au	-u
2S	ko	-ko	ngkoe	am	-m
3S	e	-a	ngaia	ana	-na/n
1P	ti	-ira	ngaira	ara	-ra
2P	kam	-ngkamii	ngkamii	amii	-mii
3P	a	-ia/i	ngaiia	aia	-ia

Demonstratives[12]

	Basic		Masculine		Feminine	Human	Neuter	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
Proximal	aei	aikai	teuaaei	uaakai	neiei	naakai	te baei	baikai
Medial	anne	akanne	teuaanne	uakanne	neienne	naakanne	te baenne	baikanne
Distal	arei	akekei	teuaarei	uaakekei	neierei	naakekei	te baerei	baikekei

The basic 'aei' simply means "this", 'anne' is "that", 'arei' is "that over there" and are used after the noun. 'Aikai' is "these" and so on. The masculine "teuaei" means "this man", the feminine "neiei" means "this woman", and the inanimate "te baei" means "this thing". There's only feminine singular. The human plural serves for mixed groups. [12]

Adverbs[12]

	Time	Place
Proximal	ngkai	ikai
Medial	ngkanne	ikanne
Distal	ngkekei	ikekei

"Ngkai" is "now", "ngkanne" is "then" and "ngkekei" is "later". "Ikai" is "here", "ikanne" is "there" and "ikekei" is "over there".

Verbs

Verbs do not conjugate according to person, number, tense, aspect or mood.[13] This verbal categories are indicated by underlined particles. Nonetheless, there's a passive suffix -**aki** like in:

- *E kabooa te raiti* He bought the rice.

- *E kabooaki te raiti* The rice was bought (by him).

Any adjective can also be an intransitive verb. Transitive verbs can be formed by the circumfix ka- (...) -a creating a causative ver, e.g. "uraura" (to be red) becomes "kaurauraa" (to redden). Tense is marked by adverbs. However, the default interpretation of the unmarked (by adverbs) verb is a past tense. Below is a list of verbal particles[14]:

- *a* (immediate, incompleted and indeterminate)

- *tabe n(i)* (progressive)

- *nang(i)* (prospective future)
- *na* (general future)
- *a tib'a* (immediate past)
- *a tia n(i)* (past perfect)

Copula verbs

There are no verbs corresponding to English "to be", so a stative verb must be used or a zero copula strategy:

Te tia mmwakuri teuaarei. (mwakuri or even makuri are usual forms)

A workman   that man.

That man is a workman.

However there's a locative copula verb "mena":

E mena iaon te taibora te booro.

The ball is on the table

Existential verb

There's also no corresponding verb to "to have", instead an existential verb meaning "there to be" is used - **iai**.

Reduplication

Reduplication is used to mark aspect.

- Partial reduplication marks the habitual aspect for example "nako" (to go) and "naanako" (to usually go).
- Full reduplication shows the continuative aspect, e.g. "koro" (to cut), "korokoro" (to continually cut).
- Mixed: "kiba" (to jump), "kiikiba" (to usually jump), "kibakiba" (to continually jump, to be excited), "kikibakiba" (to jump on regular occasions).

Adjectives can also be formed by reduplication with the meaning of "abundant in [adj.]" - "karau" (rain), "kakarau" (rainy).

Negation

The main negator is the particle "aki" placed after the pronoun and before the verb. The negator "aikoa" is for counterexpected situations.

Ko aki taetae : you don't speak.

Numerals

Gilbertese uses classifiers for counting with numerals like southeast Asian languages (Chinese, Vietnamese, etc.). These classifiers are suffixes to the numerals: -ua (general, for objects), -man (animate beings), -kai (plants, land, fish hooks), -ai (fish, elongated objects), -waa (transportation), -baa (leaves, flat objects) among many others. It is a decimal system with -bwi as a "10 counting" suffix. Zero ("akea") is just the word for 'nothing'.[15]

	Root	With -ua classifier
0	akea	-
1	te	teuana
2	uo/ua	uoua
3	ten(i)	tenua [16]
4	a	aua
5	nima	nimaua
6	ono	onoua
7	it(i)	itiua
8	wan(i)	waniua
9	ruai	ruaiua
10	te	tebwina

Written Gilbertese

The Gilbertese language is written in the Latin script, which was introduced in the 1840s when Hiram Bingham Jr, a protestant missionary, first translated the Bible into Gilbertese. Previously, the language was unwritten. Long vowels and consonants are now represented by doubling the character, and a few digraphs are used for the velar nasals (/ŋ ŋ:/) and velarized bilabials (i.e. /pˠ mˠ/). Bingham Jr and the first Roman Catholic missionaries (1888) did not indicate in their script the vowel length by doubling the character. Neither they had distinguished the pronunciation of the vowel /a/ after velarized bilabials, like bw and mw, /pˠ/ and /mˠ/, that result in discrepancies between old scripts and modern scripts. For example, the word maneaba should be written *mwaneaba* and the atoll of Makin, *Mwaakin*. The Kiribati Protestant Church also used a different script for these two velarized bilabials, "b'a" and "m'a" forms are found in Protestant publications.

Gilbertese Spelling System[17]

Letter	A	AA	B	**BW**	E	EE	I	II	K	M	**MM**	**MW**	N	**NN**	NG	**NGNG**	O	OO	R	T	U	UU	W
IPA	/ä/	/ä:/	/p/	/pˠ/	/e/	/e:/	/i/	/i:/	/k/	/m/	/m:/	/mˠ/	/n/	/n:/	/ŋ/	/ŋ:/	/o/	/o:/	/r/	/t/	/u/	/u:/	/βˠ/

Translating Kiribati

One difficulty in translating the Bible was references to words such as "mountain", a geographical phenomenon unknown to the people of the islands of Kiribati at the time (heard only in the myths from Samoa). Bingham decided to use "hilly", which would be more easily understood. Such adjustments are common to all languages as "modern" things require the creation of new words. For example, the Gilbertese word for airplane is *te wanikiba*, "the canoe that flies".

Catholic missionaries arrived at the islands in 1888 and translated the Bible independently of Bingham, resulting in differences (Bingham wrote Jesus as "Iesu", while the Catholics wrote "Ietu") that would be resolved only in the 20th century. In 1954, Father Ernest Sabatier published the bigger and more accurate Kiribati to French dictionary (translated into English by Sister Olivia): *Dictionnaire gilbertin–français*, 981 pages (edited by South Pacific Commission in 1971). It remains the only work of importance between the Kiribati and a Western language. It was then reversed by Frédéric Giraldi in 1995, creating the first French to Kiribati dictionary. In addition, a grammar section was added by Father Gratien Bermond (MSC). This dictionary is available at the French National Library (rare language department) and at the headquarters of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC), Issoudun.

Useful phrases

- Hello – Mauri
- Hello – [singular] Ko na mauri (*You will hello*)
- Hello – [plural] Kam na mauri (*You [plural] will hello*)
- How are you? – Ko uara?
- How are you? – [to several people] Kam uara?
- Thank you – Ko rabwa
- Thank you – [to several people] Kam rabwa
- Goodbye – Ti a boo (*we will meet*)

Text sample

Ao ti teuana aia taetae ka-in aonaba ma aia taeka ngkekei. Ao ngke a waerake, ao a kunea te tabo teuana ae aoraoi n te aba are Tina; ao a maeka iai. Ao a i taetae i rouia ni kangai, Ka-raki, ti na karaoi buatua, ao ti na kabuoki raoi. Ao aia atibu boni buatua, ao aia raim boni bitumen. Ao a kangai, Ka-raki, ti na katea ara kawa teuana, ma te taua, ae e na rota karawa taubukina, ao ti na karekea arara ae kakanato; ba ti kawa ni kamaeaki nako aonaba ni kabuta. Ao E ruo Iehova ba E na nora te kawa arei ma te taua arei, ake a katei natiia aomata. Ao E taku Iehova, Noria, te botanaomata ae ti teuana te koraki aei, ao ti teuana aia taetae; ao aei ae a moa ni karaoia: ao ngkai, ane e na aki tauaki mai rouia te b'ai teuana ae a reke nanoia iai ba a na karaoia. Ka-raki, ti na ruo, ao tin a kakaokoroi aia taetae iai, ba a aonga n aki atai nako aia taeka. Ma ngaia are E kamaeia nako Iehova mai iai nako aonaba ni kabuta: ao a toki ni katea te kawa arei. Ma ngaia are e aranaki ka Babera; ba kioina ngke E bita aia taetae ka-in aonaba ni kabaneia iai Iehova: ao E kamaeia nako Iehova mai ai nako aonaba ni kabuta.[18]

(Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. The Lord said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth. Book of Genesis 11:1–9)[19]

Notes

1. Gilbertese (https://www.ethnologue.com/18/language/gil/) at *Ethnologue* (18th ed., 2015)
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11. Trussel, Stephen (1979). "Lesson 13" (https://www.trussel.com/kir/lessons/gramlesson13.pdf) (PDF). *Kiribati (Gilbertese): Grammar Handbook*. The Experiment Press: Vermont Peace Corps Language Handbook Series. pp. 85–86.
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13. Trussel, Stephen (1979). "Lesson 31" (https://www.trussel.com/kir/lessons/gramlesson31.pdf) (PDF). *Kiribati (Gilbertese): Grammar Handbook*. The Experiment Press: Vermont Peace Corps Language Handbook Series. pp. 203–208.
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16. The script teniua is also usual.
17. "Te taetae ni Kiribati - Kiribati Language Lessons - 10" (http://www.trussel.com/kir/less10.htm). *www.trussel.com*.
18. "Tower of Babel in Kiribati" (https://www.omniglot.com/babel/kiribati.htm). *www.omniglot.com*.
19. "Bible Gateway passage: Genesis 11:1-9 - New International Version" (https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+11%3A1-9&version=NIV). *Bible Gateway*.

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- Gilbertese words collection for SuperMemo (https://web.archive.org/web/20130901095153/http://www.banaban.net/supermemo/kiribatese.html)
- Kaipuleohone archive includes recordings (https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/handle/10125/36142) and written materials on Kiribati
- Materials on Fijian are included in the open access Arthur Capell collections (AC1 (http://catalog.paradisec.org.au/collections/AC1) and AC2 (http://catalog.paradisec.org.au/collections/AC2)) held by Paradisec.
- Additional Kiribati materials in Paradisec from Bill Palmer (BP5 (http://catalog.paradisec.org.au/collections/BP5)) and Jeff Siegel (JS2 (http://catalog.paradisec.org.au/collections/JS2))
- Dictionary (https://web.archive.org/web/20060321140705/http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org/translation/Gilbertese/) with Gilbertese – English Translations from Webster's Online Dictionary (https://web.archive.org/web/20120223164907/http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org/) – The Rosetta Edition
- How to count in Gilbertese (http://www.languagesandnumbers.com/how-to-count-in-gilbertese/en/gil/)